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**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# **DIVERGENCE IN ACCENT NEUTRALIZATION AMONG TEACHERS IN SELECTED SCHOOLS IN ABUJA, NIGERIA**

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## **Abstract**

The study aimed at examining divergence in accent neutralization among secondary school teachers in Abuja, Nigeria, the divergence strategies and their attendant effects on teacher-student interlocution. In the study which was aimed at addressing accent biases or stereotypes and the conflict between Standard English and Nigerian English identity, the researchers adopted observation techniques for data collection, using Communication Accommodation Theory for data analysis. After eight teachers were observed and recorded from two public schools and two private schools, it was revealed that teachers diverge to align with cultural identity. Thus, divergence should not be strictly perceived as a teacher's lack of phonological resources but rather, on the basis of communicative and accommodative goals.

**Keywords:** Divergence, Accent Neutralization, Teachers, Schools.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The accents of speakers play dynamic roles in promoting social acceptance from listeners. The speakers' accommodated accents regulate how the audience would draw closer, or distance themselves away from the speakers; and how the audience would value and judge where the speakers come from. Accents, native and non-native, symbolize geographical and social identities. Leonardo argues that "it does not take training in linguistics to be able to perceive the foreign accent of a nonnative speaker talking" (5). This suggests that every language user speaks with an accent, native or non-native, and such an accent can be detected. The accent of the speaker primarily projects communication's superior values to the listener before the main message. Every communicator makes a choice between a standard accent and a regional one.

Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, is linguistically diversified. It is home to diverse ethnicities, cultures, languages, dialects and accent. Many teachers and students in Abuja

are bilingual or multilingual speakers of English and at least one or two indigenous or foreign languages. English is used as a lingua franca, widely spoken as a language of instructions and businesses in Abuja. This multilingual setting has made the study of divergence in accent neutralization among teachers significant as it offers useful insights into how Abuja teachers diverge in their accents and the adjustment strategies they use.

The study addresses the problems of linguistic biases and stereotypes, providing insights into the enhancement of cultural and social integration as well as mutual understanding among teachers and students in their communications. Secondly, it re-examines the tension between Standard English and Nigerian English identity in Abuja multilingual secondary school setting with emphasis on divergence as a bridge of the conflict between linguistic identity and institutional expectations. Thus, the objectives of the study are to examine teachers' accent divergence, the strategies they use and the overall impact on building social bonds and fostering cultural identity.

### CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

English has accents around the world speakers associate with; some are standardized, others non-standard. The standard accent is associated with power and exclusivity. Moyer highlights that "accents are widely associated with social values like correctness, desirability, prestige, and power" (102). Apart from prestige and power, Uzun (160) confirms that an "accent works as a marker of an ethnic or national identity". This entails that accents are associated with power, social influence and national identity. Accent may also be viewed as the "distinct ways a language is pronounced; whether by native or non-native speakers" (Levis and Zhou 1). Often, pronunciation points to the regionalism speakers display in speeches to enhance intelligibility.

All accents are intelligible, but intelligibility is not the only speech value people draw from communication; accommodation is invaluable in speech. Agha emphasizes that "accent is neither precise nor free of ideological distortion" (232). Of course, even the neutral accent is an ideological yardstick motivated by erudition and standardization. To buttress this, Agha concretizes that "standard English accent is a social construct" (233). It deals with standardization and nativization. Sometimes, speakers diverge from standard to localized accent when they neutralize their accents.

#### Accent Neutralization

Accent neutralization occurs in convergent and divergent ways. "Divergence is behavior when someone does not show any similarities between one another in interaction" (Nabila et al 376). On the other hand, convergence occurs when a speaker "tries to adapt the communicative behavior to be more similar to the interlocutor" (Nabila et al 376). Accent neutralization is a deep stimulation of motives, and one of the motives is "that individuals would like to make their speech more like that of a group they aspire to" (Krudthong 101). They adjust their accents in the likeness of their audience. This motivation drives the social pressure that overwhelms the speaker. Sometimes, it is "a sociocultural recalibration that mitigates regionally accented English to comply with global integration" (Masangya 54).

This shows that sometimes speakers are under pressure to diverge or converge, or lose group solidarity. Dragojevic et al suggest that "these adjustments are conscious and deliberate" (41), and are motivated by two factors, namely: affective and cognitive motives. Cognitive motive relates to comprehension and effective communication, while affective motive refers to the speaker's concern to maintain or manage identity (Dragojevic et al 41). Abuja teachers may diverge to satisfy either or both motives.

#### Divergence

Divergence occurs when a speaker adjusts their language features to indicate their identity. According to Dragojevic et al. “divergence refers to adjusting one’s communicative behaviors to be more dissimilar to another’s” (36). This means that divergence is the adjustment of language behaviour to disassociate from the audience.

Giles et al. state explicitly that divergence refers to the “way in which speakers accentuate speech and nonverbal difference between themselves and others” (8). When the localized features of the language of a speaker are accentuated and non-neutralized, divergence takes place. A speaker may consciously or unconsciously diverge and just like many other studies; this study shows how Abuja teachers intentionally or unintentionally diverge.

### **EMPIRICAL REVIEW**

Sunattha Krudthong (2019) carried out a study on “An Investigation of Accent Neutralization in British 90’s Songs: A Case Study of Popular Music”, and the study examines how British singers pronounced words in the 90’s Hit Popular Music, losing their accent to sound American when singing. Krudthong adopted a comparative research method and drew data from selected songs sung by British singers in the 90’s. The researcher found out that most British pop singers in the 90’s sang with neutralized accents in favour of the American accent. Additionally, Krudthong discovered that factors such accommodation, music motivation and ethnic identity influenced the singers. While Krudthong drew his data from songs for his study, this study collected data from secondary school teachers in Abuja. Also, Krudthong adopted comparative model, but this study applied Accommodation theory.

Sultan Elma conducted a study in 2014 on the title: “Vernacular Language Origin and Students’ Accent Neutralization for Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) Employability”. Sultan utilized Descriptive-correlational Method of research to determine the relationship between vernacular language origin and students’ English language accent neutralization to ascertain the respondents’ employability in BPO market. The respondents were made up of fourth year college students in the College of Arts and Sciences. One by one, the research assessed the respondents, each pronouncing eighty-seven words, consisting of consonant, consonant cluster, diphthong and vowel sounds. The researcher used questionnaire as research instrument and made the respondents read fifteen sentences to assess intonation, five declarative sentences, five yes-no sentences and five tag question sentences. At the end of the study, the researcher found out that vowel sounds and diphthongs, local languages and native dialects are significantly related to accent neutralization. This made the researcher to conclude that the more students used English language as an indigenous language at home, the greater chances of getting their accent neutralized. However, accent neutralization may hardly occur only on the basis that a speaker has been using English language at home. In addition, beyond that this present study examines divergence in accent neutralization of teachers in Abuja using accommodation theory.

### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Howard Giles first introduced the theory of Communication Accommodation 1973 when he shared his thought on the model of ‘Mobility accent’ (Hadiyat 331). Later on, the theory gained much popularity in Mass Communication and Linguistics, widely known as Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT).

Accommodation theory is a suitable approach to the study of divergence in accent neutralization. It is an “interdisciplinary model of relational and identity processes in communicative interaction” (Coupland and Jaworski 241-242). The theory encapsulates ideologies on social identity, power dynamics and context. The theory proposes “three types of adjustments, convergence, divergence and maintenance” (Elhami 194). Convergence refers to when a communicator adapt his language patterns to become similar to



interlocutors. On the other hand, divergent speaker adjusts to the opposite of the listener; he emphasizes linguistic features which make him different from standardized features. Maintenance is non-accommodation, and in this case, the speaker neither diverges nor converges.

### METHODOLOGY

The study employed qualitative approach, where the researchers were observed and the researchers recorded the teacher-student interactions during classes and assemblies in the selected schools of Abuja, Nigeria. The participants benefited from the researchers' ethical standards of confidentiality and consent, having been told of the observation and recording ahead of time. The researchers adopted stratified sampling technique, and this enabled them to sample respondents in groups to improve precision and representation. Eight (8) teachers were observed and recorded from two public schools and two private schools. The participants were selected from Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv and Edo teachers. Seven (7) data were isolated from the entire data for their relevance in the study target. Lastly, the data were presented in tables and analyzed using Howard Giles' Accommodation Theory.

### DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Results of the study on divergence in accent neutralization of teachers in Abuja have shown that some teachers adjust their accents using different divergence strategies, including downward or upward adjustments while others do not diverge. Some Abuja teachers diverge to accommodate their students in classes and at assemblies across different phonological features, including stress, pronunciation, intonation, liaison, repetition, tempo and syllabification.

Table 1

| Neutral   | Divergence                               | Context                       |
|-----------|--|-------------------------------|
| /fə̀rɔ:l/ | Most of you play for all time /'fɒ̀'ɔ:l/ | Assembly, teacher to students |
| /ə̀'naue/ | At least, an hour of reading /'an 'auə/  |                               |

The data illustrate that the teacher diverged by cancelling the liaison features in 'for all' /fə̀rɔ:l/. Instead of liaising or pronouncing the two words as a unit, the teacher pronounced them separately as /'fɒ̀'ɔ:l/, as if each were in isolation, stressing each syllable. The same prosodic disintegration was observed in 'an hour' /ə̀'naue/ where the teacher pronounced as /'an 'auə/.

However, it was observed that the adjustment facilitated comprehension. Note that stressing of every syllable is a general feature of localized accent. The Abuja teacher diverged to the speech patterns of students, stressing each syllable to spell out phonosemantic features in each of them. This shows that Abuja teachers sometimes diverge in their accent neutralization to avoid social distancing from their students.

Table 2

| Neutral   | Divergence                                      | Context                       |
|-----------|---|-------------------------------|
| /General/ | There will be a general punishment /'ge'ne`ral/ | Assembly, teacher to students |
| /Delay/   | For any delay in payment of fees. /de`lay/      |                               |

The data demonstrate that the speaker stressed the unstressed syllables in 'general' and 'delay'. It was observed that the teacher slowed down the communication pace and stressed all the syllables in 'general' and 'delay' instead of converging to the neutralized

accent where the words (nouns) are stressed only on the first syllable.

Nigerian indigenous languages are syllable-timed, and this phonological practice illustrates how the teachers diverge to localized features to maintain social identity and linguistic solidarity with students even in such a formal setting.

Table 3

| Neutral     | Convergence                                     | Context                             |
|-------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| /ˈstjudnts/ | You are our students                            | English lesson, teacher to students |
| /lk'sept/   | Except if the answers correspond /ek'sept/.     |                                     |
| /ˈprɪnslpl/ | The principal will flog you himself /prɪnslpə/. |                                     |
| /ˈsta:tld/  | So, let's get started /sta:ted/.                |                                     |

The English teacher converged to the standard accent using stress-timed rhythm. He replaced localized features with neutral norms. In the first example, 'students' /ˈstjʊdnts/ was correctly pronounced instead of /stʊdnts/ while 'except' was used in place of the localized /ek'sept/. In the second instance, the teacher substituted 'principal' /prɪnslpə/ with the neutralized /ˈprɪnslpl/ and 'started' /sta:ted/ with the neutral /ˈsta:tld/.

This shows that English teachers are models of institutional norms who exhibit the neutral accent to point at positive evaluation and recommendation, especially while interacting with the students in class. Some Abuja teachers converge in class contexts not only to demonstrate linguistic exposure but to also align with professional pressure. The institution may not expect anything less than the standard accent especially the English teachers are paid to inculcate in students. They are the authority students converge from time to time towards. While other teachers may diverge, English teachers find themselves under pressure to converge.

Table 4

| Neutral | Divergence  | Context                       |
|---------|---|-------------------------------|
| Fast    | Booster classes started ... on Monday ... last week ... please ... hear me well ... tell your parents ... to pay ... on time. | Assembly, teacher to students |

The standard accent is potentially fast and rhythmic. In the data above, it was observed that the teacher spoke carefully and slowly to emphasize important chunks of message students needed to take home to their parents. Consistent pauses enabled the teacher to effectively diverge to a slow speech pace suitable for the addressees, the population of students on the assembly. The intermittent pauses enabled the teacher to break down expressions and classification of ideas in the announcement.

The above phonological performance contrasts the standardized accent which is delivered at a relatively fast pace and in stress-timed rhythm. Abuja teachers adopt the slow pace accent to enhanced intelligibility and reject overly polished accent that deprives identity.

Table 5

| Neutral | Divergence                                   | Context                       |
|---------|--|-------------------------------|
| /plæt/  | Your hair. You didn't plait... I mean plait. | Classroom, teacher to student |



|            |  |  |
|------------|--|--|
| /bə`na:nə/ | like eating unripe bananas bananas ... you know. |  |
|------------|--|--|

The data establishes the teacher diverged downward. In 'plait', the teacher diverged from the neutral accent - /plæt/ - to the regional one, where 'plait' became /plelt/, while 'bananas'/bə`na:nəz/ was substituted for /bə`næ`næs/. This sharp divergence was achieved through vowel and consonant substitutions. Additionally, among teachers in Abuja divergence of this kind is used sometimes to reinforce in-group linguistic and social solidarity and resistance to overly institutional elitism. Whether this overtly intentional always or not, such teachers persistently revert to the use of Nigerian English phonological features, or sometimes even code-switch into Nigerian pidgin or indigenous languages to garner more social harmony.

Table 6

| Neutral       | Divergence  | Context                        |
|---------------|---|--------------------------------|
| Vege/ta/ble   | ... take more ve/ge/ta/bles and fruits                    | Classroom, teacher to students |
| Vehe/men/tly  | ...I chose Agric. ...(pause)... ve/he/men/tly, I decided. |                                |
| In/teres/ting | ...because it's an in/te/res/ting field.                  |                                |

The teacher diverged in his Agricultural class. Data in the table show how the teacher adjusted downward, using regional syllabification to make his accent clearer by assigning four syllables to ve/ge/ta/ble, ve/he/men/tly and in/te/res/ting instead of neutralizing upwards, where ve/ge/ta/ble is converged as vege/ta/ble, while ve/he/men/tly becomes vehe/men/tly or in/te/res/ting is neutralized as in/teres/ting. This adjustment strategy illustrates that often Abuja teachers diverged in their accent neutralization to reinforce clarity and mutual intelligibility.

Table 7

| Tone    | Convergence   | Context                       |
|---------|---|-------------------------------|
| Rising  | Listen up! ↗  | Classroom, teacher to student |
| Falling | Do you get the instruction? ↘<br>Are we together? ↘ |                               |

The data demonstrate upward convergence where the teacher used rising and falling tones with stress-timed rhythm. "Listen up!", with a rising tone, the teacher to called the cooperation of students. In "You haven't finished yet?" the teacher neutralized his accent, asking a student to speed and catch up with the rest of the class. The replacement of localized features with standardized forms reflects how some Abuja teachers distance themselves from their audience. This invariably reflects a shift nativity to align with institutional norms and a deep desire to model prestige.

**Divergence Strategies Abuja Teachers Adopt in Accent Neutralization**

Results of the study have shown that about 60% of teachers in Abuja fully diverge in accent neutralization to improve intelligibility and retain their social identity. On the other hand, about 40% of them do not fully diverge; they converge to align with institutional



identity, and model linguistic prestige. This group of teachers uses upward adjustment strategy where they modifying pronunciation to reinforce authority and strengthen power dynamics where the gap between teacher and student speech is accentuated. They adopt formal register and avoid Nigerian English colloquialisms to enhance stylistic distancing and persistence in standardization. Their convergence signals correctness and professional authority, reinforcing teacher and student hierarchy while retaining standard language ideology.

However, majority of the teachers diverge in their accent neutralization where they use downward adjustment strategies, inclining to non-neutralized phonological features such as syllable-timed Nigerian English rhythm and slower tempo to maintain linguistic identity and social boundary. Additionally, the use of full divergence strategy enables the teachers to entirely accustom to linguistic identity of the students and strengthen solidarity during interactions.

### **Effects of Teachers' Divergence in Accent Neutralization in Abuja**

The result of the study indicates that divergence in accent neutralization among teachers in Abuja secondary schools have maximum effects on teacher-student interactions. For instance divergence enables teachers to increase social bonds despite linguistic and cultural diversity between Abuja teachers and students, fostering a common linguistic identity. Through divergence, Abuja teachers easily achieve clarity, linguistic harmonization and reduced misunderstanding in classes and other platforms of interaction. Meanwhile, sometimes, standardized forms are let down in favour of localized features in the interest of intelligibility but at the detriment of standardization and intricate phonological awareness. This phonological behaviour leads to inconsistent linguistic exposure and performance in formal contexts.

Teachers who converge promote standard norms, exposing students to standardized fascinating linguistic credibility and target pronunciation models, at the same time create social and linguistic distance that make students feel intimidated or linguistically inferior and this further heightens English learning anxiety among less efficient learners as self-monitoring and hesitation lead to fear of speaking.

### **CONCLUSION**

Teachers' divergence in accent neutralization in Abuja secondary schools was studied with the aim of identifying divergence strategies used and assessing their effects on teacher-student interlocutions. Data were gathered during assemblies and lessons through observation, recording and note-taking. Four teachers from different ethnicities in public schools and four from private schools were observed. The collected data were harmonized, presented in tables and analyzed.

The results confirm that teachers in Abuja, Nigeria do not only diverge their accents, but also converge in different phonological ways using full, downward and upward adjustment strategies. They diverge downward to regional accent to foster cultural unification, linguistic identity and intelligibility. In other cases, they converge to maintain institutional norms social mobility. The study suggests that a profounder understanding of divergence strategies may help to tackle problems associated with accent biases or stereotypes among teachers and students, as well as resolve the conflict between Standard English and Nigerian English identity in Abuja schools. Moreover, the study provides empirical data on Abuja speech dynamics to reduce over-reliance on generalized Nigerian English studies as context-specific evidence for pedagogy and educational policy. Notwithstanding, the domain of divergence in accent neutralization is still widely open for more research. Future research can be carried out to study how students and teachers diverge in relation to power dynamics. Another study may take on the aspect of attitudes



towards speakers who diverge in Abuja exploring accent discriminations.

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